

Gathering Public Input; West Jackson Ave. Redevelopment

In the spring of 2014, City of Knoxville officials asked for public input on how to proceed with reshaping the 500 block of West Jackson Avenue.

About 100 people - potential developers, downtown and Old City property owners, residents and advocates - came to an April 3 public forum at the Southern Depot, 318 W. Depot Ave.

Even more people mailed in comment cards or shared their ideas over several weeks in an online survey.

The publicly-owned property became something of a blank canvas following a major fire in 2007, followed by another on Feb. 1, 2014, which destroyed the five historic McClung Warehouses buildings that had once towered above the 500 block of West Jackson.

Asked for suggestions, a large number of the commenters said they wanted mixed-use redevelopment - buildings for residential and commercial retail uses, with parking. (Underground parking was touted; alternatively, an idea of an elevated green space with parking below it was also proposed.)

"Connectivity" was a common theme.

Many people told City officials that they wanted a greenway and bicycle trail that connected the Old City with World's Fair Park. A path following the railroad was backed by some; others said they were supportive of a trail along Jackson Avenue so long as it avoided the sharp ups and downs of the street viaducts in order to be attractive to walkers and riders.

Some commenters wanted a redevelopment plan that would scale the large hill and connect Jackson Avenue with Vine Avenue and on to Market Square - either by a grand staircase or some sort of "skyway."

Other ideas ranged from creating a public event space, to reinforcing and extending the North Gay Street arts district, to maintaining and capitalizing on the "urban chic" feel of being a former warehouse district with close proximity to railroad tracks.

Dozens of other suggestions were proposed and discussed for the tract.

City officials have been seeking ideas for redevelopment of all publicly-owned properties between Gay Street and Broadway, which include both a Jackson Avenue parking lot as well as the properties acquired in November 2013 in a settlement with a bankruptcy trustee.

The block, its aesthetic design and its use are important in multiple ways. It's highly visible from Interstate 40; it's considered a prime block for commercial and residential redevelopment; and it's strategically located - it connects the Old City with World's Fair Park, for example, but it also links downtown proper with Downtown North.

Input from the April 3 forum and from online survey comments are helping to guide the City's issuance of a Request for Proposals.

Officials emphasized that there was no preconceived starting point or plan for the 500 block of West Jackson and that public participation is vital in defining how the corridor will be redeveloped.

The Office of Redevelopment staff has pledged to share the feedback gathered during the input process.

The RFP is expected to go out later this year, after additional analysis in the fall of 2014 that draws on the expertise of the Urban Land Institute, a 32,000-member nonprofit research and education organization whose staff facilitates multidisciplinary forums on real estate and aims to create great spaces.